

Daily Herald Editorial, July 23, 2007

Lake Michigan is one of the Chicago-area's most important natural resources, including as the main source of drinking water for much of the area. That's why we support the call from Chicago-area political leaders to fight plans by BP to increase significantly the pollutants it puts into the lake at its Whiting, Ind., oil refinery on the lake's southern shore.

BP received a permit from the Indiana Department of Environmental Management to release 54 percent more ammonia and 35 percent more industrial sludge into the lake every day. That represents the maximum allowed by the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency for sludge, which is full of concentrated heavy metals, and about half of what is allowed for ammonia, which the EPA says leads to algae blooms that can kill fish.

But it is the first time in a decade that new dumping has been allowed into the lake, said Congressman Mark Kirk, a Republican from Highland Park, who is promoting a petition opposing BP's plans. Kirk is being joined by Democratic Rep. Rahm Emanuel of Chicago, Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, a Springfield Democrat, and the Daley administration in urging the signing of the petition, which can be found at Kirkforcongress.com.

"I think BP now stands for bad polluter," Kirk said when taking media representatives on a boat tour to the refinery. "They need to be called out on their corporate hypocrisy." He refers to the company's efforts to market itself as environmentally friendly.

He said Indiana authorities made a "horrible mistake" in approving the permit. Indeed, using a loophole that allows additional pollution if the measure leads to "significant social and economic benefits" is a stretch. BP said it would result in the addition of 80 jobs and would allow them to make gas from Canadian oil, helping reduce U.S. dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

While we support the petition drive and back the likely U.S. House vote on a resolution opposing BP's plans, we are heartened that BP has indicated a willingness to revisit the issue despite Indiana's approval.

We urge them to not only revisit it but significantly change their plans and indeed live up to the image it wants to create as being environmentally friendly.

Refinery Manager Dan Sajkowski told the Gary Post-Tribune that BP was "open to dialogue" with critics on how to cut pollution. BP spokesman Scott Dean was quoted in a Daily Herald story Saturday as saying "BP has no intention of doing anything that would damage Lake Michigan. We believe we can operate well under the permitted levels."

We need more assurances than that, however. BP needs to commit more money to reduce the amount of pollution into Lake Michigan rather than increase it. It says it won't start the increased ammonia and sludge dumping until 2011 so it has time, just as the politicians do, to work out a better answer to this issue so Lake Michigan remains protected.

In the meantime, we also will support Kirk's continued efforts to promote even stricter controls on dumping into the lake than what the 1970's federal Clean Air Act was able to do.